

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C-1

WASHINGTON POST
18 FEBRUARY 1983

The TV Column

White House Wanted ABC Report Delayed

By John Carmody

National Security Adviser William P. Clark called ABC News late Wednesday afternoon to ask that the network delay by 24 hours its exclusive report that President Reagan had ordered the transfer of an aircraft carrier and four AWACS planes over the weekend in moves designed to discourage Libya's leader, Col. Muammar Qaddafi, from, as ABC put it, "starting a war."

After consultation among top ABC executives, the network decided to go with the report, prepared by chief Pentagon correspondent John McWethy. It led the 6:30 (or first feed) of Wednesday's "ABC World News Tonight."

According to ABC News, McWethy had already delayed release of the story a day at the request of his sources.

Both "CBS Evening News" and "NBC Nightly News," alerted by the ABC telecast, had shorter versions of the story in their broadcasts that night, although NBC's report made only its second, or 7 p.m., feed.

The report was subsequently brought up at the presidential press conference later Wednesday evening.

Presidential assistant Clark initially attempted to contact ABC News president Rooney Arledge Wednesday afternoon. But Arledge was then unavailable, and Clark was referred to Ed Fouhy, the ABC News bureau chief in Washington.

"I don't feel I should go into details of the conversation," Fouhy said yesterday. "But I can say the White House was unhappy with the story and that he asked us to delay it. Not cancel it, delay it."

Fouhy said that McWethy had been working on the story for several weeks, but after Clark's call "we took another look at it, double-checked our sources and then a lot of us here and in New York discussed it."

Arledge, who is also ABC Sports president, had been busy in New York that day with major league baseball negotiations.

He was eventually contacted and joined the discussions, along with his top aide, David Burke, and senior news president Richard Wald, in a conference call with the Washington bureau.

Fouhy, meanwhile, had discussed the report further with Clark's deputy on the National Security Council, Robert McFarland.

Burke said yesterday that "McWethy had been terribly responsible in his reporting on the story, and I think the network behaved responsibly, too."

He said he understood the reason for "Judge Clark's call entirely."

Both Burke and Fouhy declined to characterize the White House call as an example of undue pressure or as being out of place.

Sources at the White House yesterday said that Clark's request for a delay "was for intelligence reasons, involving sources and methods."

In his report, McWethy said that "ABC News has learned that the United States has secretly deployed four early-warning AWACS planes to Egypt on short notice and has rushed the aircraft carrier Nimitz and three escort ships from the coast of Lebanon to Libya."

"Unofficially," McWethy said, "intelligence sources say the sudden movement is a direct result of a military buildup by Libya in the southeastern corner of that country . . . which U.S. sources fear is part of a plan to overthrow the shaky, pro-American government of Sudan, headed by President Jaffar Nimeri."

McWethy reported that President Reagan made the decision last weekend and that "if Libya did move militarily, Egyptian fighters, being guided by the AWACS, will make the intercept."

CBS News said yesterday that correspondents Bob Schieffer and Lesley Stahl had quickly confirmed the McWethy report and were able to get a brief story in at the end of the first feed of "CBS Evening News."

The story led the second "CBS Evening News" feed.

NBC aired the story only midway in its second feed after White House correspondent Chris Wallace had made a check . . .